

Using close reading as a course theme in a multilingual disciplinary classroom

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Abstract

An adaptation of the traditional literary concept of close reading was developed for use in a largely multilingual classroom in which both first language (L1) and second language (L2) students were struggling to comprehend theoretical, lexically dense texts in English. This simplified method of reading a text iteratively and critically is proving helpful in encouraging student compliance with reading assignments as well as progress in academic writing capabilities. This method was developed through collaboration between a professor (Poole) in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto and the university's ELL specialist. In this method, large lectures are supplemented by small-group discussions with teaching assistants (TAs), who also engage in reflective professional development workshops to build their own skills in teaching close reading. Materials generated for both students and faculty through this initiative are being disseminated in other departments, and TAs have noted an overall improvement in students' fulfillment of reading assignments as well as their ability to generate written arguments.

Keywords: academic reading, close reading, college reading, L2 reading, academic writing, L2 writing

What can we do about the awful silence that frequently greets instructors when they pose a question to their students about the course reading? Horning's (2010) review of recent studies of the reading abilities of university students provides evidence that both first language (L1) and second language (L2) students are likely to have difficulty with academic reading. A vaguely worded essay may result from a sparse vocabulary, but it may also result from a limited comprehension of assigned texts. Even more troubling is students' tendency to overrate their reading ability and not realize the extent of their misperception of a text (Manarin, 2012). Clearly, explicit attention to reading is pedagogically warranted. Some recent studies show that teaching through close reading of disciplinary texts can improve students' reading and writing (Gogan, 2013; Pearlman, 2013). Tinkle, Atias, McAdams and Zukerman (2013) also describe how close reading can become part of the classroom experience even in today's large lectures.

These findings are even more pertinent when applied to L2 students. Improving reading proficiency in the L2 is considered an important path toward improving writing and analytical ability (Grabe, 2001; Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Hirvela, 2004; Lee, 2005; Leki, 2001). It is also an

essential part of preventing plagiarism, which often begins with L2 students' difficulties in comprehending course reading (Pecorari & Petric, 2014). However, many L2 students' educational backgrounds did not emphasize reading strategies as a part of learning English, and they, like many L1 students, are unprepared to cope with extended prose filled with new vocabulary and concepts (Horning, 2010).

Close Reading in a 'Reading to Write' Initiative

Several years ago, an initiative emphasizing close reading began at the University of Toronto in an introductory theory course, EAS209: Approaches to East Asia, with a deeply multilingual student population of approximately 120 students. This initiative is part of a broader collaboration called Reading to Write, developed by the East Asian Studies (EAS) department and the English Language Learning (ELL) specialist at the University of Toronto (UT). In a previous article, I described in detail how this initiative was integrated into the first two gateway courses in EAS (see Freedman, 2013). The program moves in a trajectory that begins by raising students' consciousness about their reading processes (see Manarin, 2012), then gradually introduces methods of discerning authors' arguments and uses of evidence. EAS209 is the third and final course in the series and is designed to prepare students for more advanced work in East Asian Studies.

The goal of EAS209 is for students to become capable of reading challenging theoretical texts and applying the theories in analyses of art and literature as well as historical accounts. Authors include Foucault, de Certeau, Williams, and others. Students with English as an L1, as well as L2 or L3 have trouble grasping the authors' arguments, and many are unfamiliar with generating original analyses. As a result, their writing, even if grammatically correct, is often vague and unorganized. In our initiative, we used close reading as a theme to address these concerns. The term close reading in this context is an adaptation of the traditional practice associated with literary studies (Harl, 2013). Here, close reading refers to a simplified method of reading sections of a text iteratively and critically, a method which can be adapted to many academic disciplines.

Organizing Lectures around Close Reading

Over several years, the EAS209 course instructor, Janet Poole, has developed a unique style of lecturing through modeling approaches to close reading. As with the reading strategies Manarin (2012) taught her students, this close reading method has its roots in Poole's training in literary analysis. More recently she has developed it with a conscious eye toward supporting language development. The method involves planning each lecture around a particular text students are assigned to read at home. Initially, she asked students to bring the text to a lecture but found they had difficulty finding the passages under discussion, so she now projects them on PowerPoint slides. For each lecture, she chooses two or three passages illuminating the path of the author's argument. In this way, the passages provide a touchstone for students to return to as orientation to the text.

In the first few weeks of the course, the instructor models close reading by paraphrasing and

analyzing these key passages aloud. She begins by reading the passage aloud—a valuable pedagogical technique in itself (Horning, 2013)—and then stopping to paraphrase. This step enables the many L2 students to build academic vocabulary in context, as the theoretical language is translated on the spot, and students are encouraged to ask questions. The L1 students also may be unfamiliar with the vocabulary or the patterns of thinking and expression typical of academic English or of this discipline (Horning, 2010). The goal is for all the students to benefit from the paraphrase, so it is important to choose a challenging section of the text. This oral paraphrasing also provides a more informal conversational modeling of the key skill of written paraphrase, which the students practice in their writing assignments.

Following the paraphrase, or interspersed with it, Poole chooses various statements to analyze. This may take the form of showing how a course concept is reflected in the author's words. Alternatively, she might identify quotable areas, think aloud about ambiguities in the text, or contrast a statement with one in another section of the same work or in a work by another author. Poole might say:

Both Yanagi and Brandt are describing the same Korean bowls, but from two completely different perspectives. Brandt was an historian and Yanagi was a collector. So their goals are different, and they're writing for different audiences. You can see that reflected here, in this paragraph where Yanagi discusses the Kizaemon tea-bowl...

The instructor emphasizes how the authors' underlying value systems inform their approach to their subjects, and gives examples of how to find clues to authorial stance. Specific words or short phrases are also scrutinized. Poole emphasizes how a disciplinary term (for example, subjectivity) can be understood only by meeting it multiple times and in varying contexts; she also gives examples of how some words change their meaning over time (Aitchison, 2001). These approaches and others were documented by the ELL specialist, who observed lectures and noted each pedagogical move made by Poole. These were then condensed and listed on a handout so that other instructors could emulate the techniques (Appendix A).

Several weeks into the course, once they are beginning to get their bearings in the theoretical discourse, students are given a simplified 12-aspect method (Appendix B) for approaching texts independently. The professor guides the students through a close reading of the handout itself, and students are encouraged to ask for clarification. She focuses on ensuring students understand the key terms and the questions in each of the 12 aspects:

It says here that Aspect #2 of close reading is figuring out an author's theoretical tendency. What are some theoretical tendencies we've already noted in our readings? How would you describe Schmid's theoretical tendency? Where did you notice it? [...] Next, it asks here whether the theoretical tendency is stated or unstated. If it's unstated, how can you find out what it is?

Subsequent lectures actively involve students in the process of close reading as they use their handout for clues to determine what aspects of a passage to analyze. They also practice these techniques on quizzes and in a series of three written, low-stakes reading response assignments (Appendix C). A direct link to grades seemed necessary to promote fulfillment of the reading

assignments (Tinkle, et al., 2013).

Close Reading and Academic Writing

The instructor thus demonstrates aloud the process by which a student might develop critical ideas to be used in writing (Horning, 2013). By thinking aloud, the instructor shows students how they can begin to construct the concepts to be used in their own writing. Shifting the focus from written to oral expression probably removes some of the intimidation students may feel about critical thinking; it also emphasizes that good writing begins with reflection (Harl, 2013) and should be modelled on professional texts. As former Lead Teaching Assistant (TA) Sara Osenton remarks, “Close reading teaches them how the nitty-gritty of academic writing is done. I wish someone had told *me* to read for their *craft* all these hundreds of books I read for my PhD!”

Finally, during the last phase of the close reading process, the students develop a critical essay (in two stages) based on the course readings. Even if students still have difficulty writing, they are likely to do better on the writing assignments if they follow the close reading methods because they will have grappled with the material and developed their ideas. The grading rubrics for the course also reflect this goal: Demonstration of deep engagement with course reading is rewarded more than correct grammar or spelling. Taking the evaluative focus away from surface errors and concentrating it in the realm of ideas is also beneficial to our multilingual population (Zamel, 2004).

Organizing Tutorials around Close Reading

These EAS 209 lectures are reinforced by weekly 50-minute tutorial sessions with TAs, in groups of 25-30 students. In EAS209, close reading has become the main theme in TA training, and active discussions around close reading are central to the tutorials. As Casanave and Soza (2008) found, this verbal analysis of difficult subjects seems to help students later analyze the same ideas in writing. Usually the TAs in EAS209 have already taught in one or both of the earlier courses in the initiative, so they’ve received training in teaching reading strategies and essay writing, and creating an active learning environment. However, a lead TA (trained by the ELL coordinator and our Writing Across the Curriculum coordinator) is responsible for designing four training workshops for the TAs each term.

In the training with the Lead TA, the TAs rehearse the skill of modeling close reading by choosing a passage from a course text and comparing their individual approaches to analyzing it. As a group, the TAs also brainstorm critical questions for starting tutorial discussions, and they collaborate on choosing key passages (not already discussed in the lecture) to read closely with students. The training also focuses on standardizing grading and developing evaluative rubrics that emphasize close reading.

Ongoing Course Development

At the end of the course, some students are still unable to build an original analysis. It is possible that some of the L2 students do not comprehend the lectures well enough to make use of the information. Since the close reading demonstrations involve projecting a passage, additional slides with the professor's analytical points might be helpful. However, in general, the TAs report that many students demonstrate an enhanced grasp of academic writing. The rate of plagiarism has also declined; Poole estimates that the number of plagiarism cases has dropped by 50%.

In addition, Poole's colleagues in EAS have mentioned to her that students who completed EAS209 are independently applying its methods in more advanced courses. These advanced students sometimes turn in their essays with the "What is close reading?" handout attached (unsolicited), along with annotated course texts, to demonstrate their continued engagement with close reading. In reflecting on the initiative's impact, the former Lead TA remarked, "I think all this attention to close reading must make students stop and think about how their work is interpreted." These outcomes seem to support Hafernik's and Wiant's (2012) theory that multilingual students' progress in English can be assisted through unobtrusive methods that simultaneously benefit native English-speakers.

Barriers to reading are complex; aside from language proficiency, they may also be linked to earning a living and other demands (Hoeft, 2012). However, this Reading to Write initiative shows that the awkward silence around course reading *can* be transformed into a productive dialogue, at least some of the time, and that the approach described here (including the resources in Appendices A and B) may be useful tools in both large and small class settings. Significantly, Poole does not feel that this approach reduces the intellectual value of her course:

I used to just come in and talk about the big questions and then lament afterwards that no one had done the reading. This initiative has been great for me; it brings me back to thinking explicitly about what I'm doing in the classroom. It gives the TAs a language for teaching. And I don't think what we're doing displaces the lecture that gives you the grand story.

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Appendix A

Modeling Close Reading in a Lecture or Tutorial

Recent research identifies numerous barriers to university students' completion and comprehension of reading assignments (Hoeft, 2012; Manarin, 2012). These barriers may be educational, linguistic, socio-economic, or a combination of these and other factors. Students are often unaware of the gaps in their reading comprehension, partly because grades and comments tend to focus on written products. Here are some suggestions for shaping lecture/tutorial time so as to encourage reading completion and maximize comprehension:

Communicate excitement about reading. Explain to students why you admire certain texts or what they've meant to you in your own research or intellectual development. Undergraduates are still looking for ideas as well as significant reasons for entering a discipline.

Provide structural motivation. Motivate students to fulfill reading deadlines by structuring the course to include some brief, in-class reading quizzes. Even an ungraded, self-corrected quiz can draw attention to the importance of reading as well as help students identify areas they don't fully comprehend. (Try a 'surprise' ungraded quiz, too, or make it part of the mark).

Use texts in class. Require students to bring texts to class (either electronically or in hard copy) and to be prepared to do some close work with them. Focusing on key passages which students are asked to locate and examine during class is a powerful reinforcement of the usefulness of skimming and scanning.

Teach terminology in context. Look for disciplinary terminology embedded in the current reading and build a portion of the lecture around it. Explain how a particular reading helps to illuminate the terms used to denote complex concepts. Show contrasting usages of a term in other recently assigned readings, and explore the different connotations. Also explain how terms change meaning over time or in different contexts. Once you've gone through this process, students should become more aware of how to 'construct' their own definitions of terms. Encourage them to keep a 'personal dictionary,' recording sentences in which they meet a key disciplinary term or other vocabulary.

Fill in background gaps. Try to anticipate background information students need in order to comprehend the reading, and work it into the lecture or tutorial. Depending on the material, students may need some quick facts related to history, geography, cultural references, foreign language terms, theories, etc. Find out what they don't know by talking to them or to the TAs.

Paraphrase and analyze specific passages. Call attention to an important, problematic, ambiguous or interesting passage in the reading. Have students locate the passage (just a paragraph or two) and then read it aloud yourself, followed by your own paraphrase. This is very different from summarizing an entire reading for students (which may decrease motivation to read) because you are showing how much there is to mine from the reading and also providing a method for processing language and concepts.

The paraphrase can be followed by or interspersed with your own analysis of the passage. Link it to overarching course concepts as well as to other, perhaps contrasting, sections of the same work, so that students can experience a model of scholarly reading. Identify which sections you find quotable and explain their significance. Emphasize the hierarchy of information or ideas by identifying main vs. sub-points. Model the way you infer meaning from a text. Also, bring up other possible interpretations or

emphases.

Teach students to read rhetorically. Point out distinctions in genres or different traditions of writing on a topic. Discuss common ways authors structure an article in your field, and share some of your own approaches to processing demanding reading material. Show students how you would analyze an author's purpose, choice of quotations, relationship to a theory, underlying values or attitude toward the subject.

Identify questions students can ask of texts. There are likely certain key themes or problems that run through the readings in your course. During the lecture, mention some questions that students should be asking themselves as they read texts in this discipline. Point out how they can identify the understanding which informs a written text.

Use examples to illustrate points. Linking your lecture to a close reading of several passages also prevents the lecture from becoming too general. Choose passages that illustrate the more abstract concepts you want to convey. Examples within most students' experience are also useful for explaining concepts and will underline the relevance of ideas. Use analogies where appropriate. Also point out where authors are using examples in the texts and discuss the degree to which these examples are useful.

Model verbal argumentation. Choose a passage you don't agree with, and paraphrase it. Then provide an analysis of the error or fault you see in the text, closely linking your discussion to statements the author makes or to the underlying assumptions revealed by the author's rhetorical choices.

Preview coming readings. Take the last 5-10 minutes of a class meeting to model close reading of one key paragraph in an article students are assigned for homework and have not yet read. (It doesn't necessarily have to be the first paragraph). Use this as a 'trailer' to generate interest in and excitement about the upcoming reading. You can also use a preview time to give background information necessary for understanding the article or to present some key terminology that appears in it.

Other ideas: _____

Appendix B

What is 'close reading'?

Close reading is an essential part of university study. The process of close reading can be exciting because it requires creativity, mental alertness, and an exercise of logical reasoning. It should lead you to analytical discoveries about the text and can provide points to include in an essay.

Before reading closely, preview and skim the text, and then read it fully. Close reading usually means returning to parts of a text you've already read once in its entirety. To begin your close reading, slow down and focus deeply and critically on a particular paragraph, passage, or section of the text. Close reading implies that you'll analyze this section of the reading in multiple ways.

How can I do a close reading?

There are many possible approaches to close reading, some of which are particular to certain disciplinary areas. For example, close reading in political science may mean identifying an author's theoretical bias, whereas close reading of a biology study may involve evaluating an author's explanations of the limitations of an experiment. The goals of close reading may include gaining a deeper understanding of the author's purpose and/or critically evaluating this purpose. Both of these goals can be important stages in your own writing process. Here are 12 aspects of written work to examine as part of reading a text closely:

1. **Organization of points:** What seems to be the author's persuasive strategy? Is it convincing?
2. **Author's theoretical tendency:** Is it stated or unstated? What are the author's underlying assumptions? What evidence do you see for this?
3. **Quotations:** What is their purpose? Are these sources credible?
4. **Comparisons:** How is this idea treated in other texts on this subject?
5. **Diction:** Why has the author used one word rather than another? How would changing the diction of a sentence change its meaning?
6. **Terminology:** What disciplinary vocabulary is used here? How are these words used differently in other texts?
7. **Details:** What is the significance of this detail? How does it relate to the larger purpose of the text?
8. **Numerical data:** Why is it here? Could it be interpreted differently? Is it believable?
9. **Transitions:** Where do you see transitional words or phrases? What logical connections do they suggest?
10. **Relationship of parts to whole:** How does this passage relate to the overarching purpose of the text or its overall argument?
11. **Further implications:** When you reflect on a particular statement, how does its meaning change? What can you infer, even if it's not directly stated?
12. **Remaining questions:** What questions are not answered by this passage or text? Did the author intend to answer them?

Appendix C

Sample Reading Response Assignment, EAS209

Reading Response 3

The third reading response asks you to explain how attention to space can offer a critique of linear notions of time. Your answer should take the form of a close reading of a passage of your own choosing.

STEP 1) READ

Read through the two readings by Thomas Keirstead and Michel de Certeau.

STEP 2) CHOOSE A PASSAGE

Choose a passage from one of the readings where the author argues that spatial histories can critique a linear understanding of time/history.

STEP 3) WRITE

Do a close reading of your chosen passage in which you show how the passage reflects the author's concept of a spatial history that critiques linear time. Consider the following questions:

- 1) How does the author use 'space' as a method to think about history?
- 2) What, according to the author, becomes newly visible when we consider space as we write history?
- 3) How specifically does space critique linear time, according to the author?

Remember that these questions must be answered IN THE FORM OF A CLOSE READING. This means that you should select your passage very carefully.

You are doing your own close reading of the passage, as we have asked you to do in the quiz. But this time you are both writing and answering your own quiz!

Your paper should be one-page single-spaced, in addition to which you should cite your chosen passage as a block quote (see below for full instructions).

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